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Sethe and Baby Suggs: Exploring Maternal Ties in *Beloved*

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ABSTRACT

Perhaps one of the prime and inseparable issues related to womanhood and femininity is the concern for the body. Maternity and motherhood are invariable associations linked to all of the above in a continuous persistence of transcultural and transnational memory. Postmodernism, too recognises the nuances of motherhood in an elitist or urbanised condition. The primitive or marginalised representations of womanhood and its feminist readings stand in sharp contradiction to the "Others" interpretations bordering apparently on heteronormative views programmed to balance fecundity, productivity, constructive maternity within the attributes of the patriarchal discipline of female sexuality. In my paper I have attempted to situate childbirth, breastfeeding, pregnancy, mothering, nurturing, breeding and loving against the spatial and emotional paradigms of Toni Morrison's neo-slave narrative *Beloved*. The author surprises readers in rendering most strange and challenging aspects of motherhood in a seemingly unacceptable drama thereby loosening the stereotypical limits of the definitions of life or death.

Keywords: Motherhood, maternity, race, black womanhood, slave, slavery, body, feminism.

That mothers are both the symbolic and literal bearers of creativity embedded within a tradition of fertility, needs no further verification within the racial or socio-religious conundrum of prevalent beliefs encompassing civilisations early or modern, western or oriental, marginalised or mainstream. Yet,

it would not be an exaggeration to state that a vast majority of such women conveniently labelled “mothers”, owing primarily to the bio-physical or psycho-sexual aspects interwoven within the discourse of motherhood, are often unable to fulfil the stereotypical roles ascribed to them. The reasons may be discovered in the variable economic or political conditions – local, domestic, regional, juxtaposed against international exigencies emerging from refugee crises or expulsion of communities urged by disguised hegemonic practices in capitalist societies. Threatened by numerous practices of patriarchal civilisations in the past, mothers survive within the ennui of anxiety of loss or final deprivation of their identities in the present postcolonial societies, too. The institution suffers compulsion from severe challenges to save mothers from abuse, violence and the conflicting values of intolerance – gendered or otherwise. In the paper, I discuss aspects of motherhood in which deprivation is the governing premise for both the mother and her child. I look at Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* – a neo-slave narrative that deals exclusively within the bounds of maternity in its multiplicity of forms and expressions and offers readings of the relations that categorically bind and make the Black Women/womyn empowered to defend and combat the crises that traps their existence(s) or questions the veracity of their seemingly strange and non-normative behavioural patterns codifying the so-called white archetypes of femininity.

I begin with Sojourner Truth’s ‘Ain’t I a Woman’ speech (1852) which designates the black woman’s experience of motherhood: “ I have borne thirteen children and seen most all sold into slavery and when I cried out none but Jesus heard me.” (C. Boyce Davies) Morrison’s *Beloved* develops the similar paradox (quoted above) rooted in the existence of the black slave woman as mother. The novel portrays the lives of Black women under bondage who were compelled to accept the slave master’s tortures and subsequently remain passive as mothers or to put it the other way round, be identified as physical bearers of

children. Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu suggests: 'Perhaps there is no model flexible enough to accommodate slavery and enforced reproduction' (11). She further contends that it is impossible to associate two radically opposite ideas in a single frame. The slave women were potentially stronger than their male counterparts, at least in terms of biological productivity. The children borne by them would be condemned by law to follow all the necessary conditions of survival pronounced by the whites demanding complete authority and absolute control of the bodies of the female slaves.

Toni Morrison's response about her contemplation of Sethe, the central maternal figure in the novel, points to the inevitabilities connected with slavery and women:

Under those theatrical circumstances of slavery, if you made that claim, an unheard-of claim, which is that you are the mother of these children – that's an outrageous claim for a slave woman. She just became a mother....That's who she is. So to claim responsibility for children, to say something about what happens to them means that you claim all of it, not part of it.... She almost steps over into what she was terrified of being regarded as, which is an animal. It's an excess of maternal feeling, a total surrender to that commitment [...]. (Darling 35)

The significance of a female slave's capacity to reproduce was often manipulated as a form of resistance and there are records of feigned illness, deliberate miscarriages, and self-imposed sterility. Their drudgery affirms '[T]he biological contradiction of slavery: a mother could not mother'. (Beaulieu 12) The neo-slave narratives of the twentieth century prioritised the feminine perspective circumscribing the role of the mother in multiple ways as opposed to the nineteenth century male-authored texts that spoke less about slaves and focussed more on slavery as an institution. Morrison, Sherley Williams and California Cooper amongst other women novelists, associate the enslaved mothers along with their "maternal" prospects and

display the roots of the “motherline” (to use Andrea O’Reilly’s popular term) in their narratives.

Motherhood in all its complex stratifications takes on readers’ imagination as they encounter realities of slaves and the sublimity of ghosts and illusions in the tale of love, violence, fear and awe designed to prepare for the emergence of Beloved. There are two figures who retain to the very end their identities as mothers in the novel: Baby Suggs and Sethe. Baby Suggs is Sethe’s mother-in-law who had eight children from different partners. Scattered through the history of her life are the memories ridden with pain – pain at never seeing any of her children grow. The “people” (that is a convenient label she uses for her children) she had borne have all “run off [...] been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized”. (23) A careful selection of verbs “run”, “hanged”, “mortgaged” etc. refer to a system of itemisation or commodification for slaves by the Whites. Sethe learns of the woes of a mother and in turn silently acknowledges her own mother’s sufferings (who is unnamed) and who forms only a vignette in her mind. Baby Suggs’ recollection may sound consolatory for Sethe whose sole obsession aims at ensuring for safety for the children *she* has mothered, nursed and caressed in the most precarious conditions:

You lucky. You got three left. Three pulling at your skirts and just one raising hell from the other side. Be thankful, why don’t you? I had eight. Every one of them gave away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all, I expect worrying some body’s house into evil. My first-born. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that’s all I remember. (5)

“Eight children” sum up her maternal bonds or so it seems, since numerical value designates “worth” for the slaves accustomed to be “measured” in terms of their “produce”. Cherishing the memory of her son but refusing her “man” (or

"men"), Suggs' life is a pathos – "a woman's persistent resistance to slavery [...]". (Grewal 101) Baby Suggs transforms herself into a great matriarch following her freedom from bondage. Halle, her last surviving son buys her freedom. She undertakes a mammoth task of uniting a community. Recognising the worth of her own self and in an attempt to foster the selfhood, she assumes the stance of a preacher asking the others to love the flesh "that dances on bare feet in grass [to] Love it. Love it hard" (88). Kathleen Marks discovers in her the possibilities of a spiritually elevated soul engaged in teaching the masses the need to acknowledge the infinite possibilities associated with loving one's own self: "[She] has taken to preaching in a nearby clearing...[promoting] the love of the self, ...that same flesh precisely denigrated by slavery". (Marks 41) Baby Suggs's sermons are in tune with the Christian principles exemplified in those spaces where belief finds minimal scope for proclamation against relentless memories of loss and suffering.

Blessed with the great power of multiplication, Suggs feasts at 124 Bluestone Road beginning with "three (may be four) pies grew to ten (may be twelve). Sethe's two hens became five turkeys" (137), turns her into an obvious target of communal resentment. Suggs comes close to the prototype of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner – "the saviour-turned-villain" – the one who is accepted and excepted almost simultaneously by those whose ability to render "meaning" out of contradictions reaps futile results. Morrison depicts their parochial frame of contemplation thus: "Too much they thought. Where does she get it all Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always the centre of things?" (137) It's interesting how the "questionable holiness" comes as an afterthought – a gesture associated with the compulsion to acknowledge her "holiness" perhaps out of fear and awe at the unusual power she wielded in Ohio. Suggs resigns from the world precisely when she, as centre fails "to hold". Stamp Paid, a friend to Suggs' family paints her profile for readers:

Sixty years of losing children to the people who chewed up her life ... five years of freedom given to her by her last child, who bought her future with his... to lose him too; to acquire a daughter... see that daughter slay the children (or try to); to belong to a community step back and hold itself at a distance – well, it could wear out even a Baby Suggs, holy. (177)

Stamp Paid's reiteration of holiness (pronounced apparently in the similar vein of the other members of the community) is not without their necessary implications of doubt and resentment. "Holiness" in the above instance, compliments her being and contributes to her dignity. Yet her liberation is left incomplete to the very last. Denied burial in the clearing owing to "rules" imposed by the Whites, her body is a victim of marginalisation. The Whites, believed Suggs were sheer signifiers of ill luck – the self-same luck that follows her even to the grave.

Sethe, Baby Suggs's daughter-in-law and Halle's wife is also the slayer of her own child. Sethe, a mother-deprived daughter remembers vaguely as the one "among many backs turned away from her, stooping in a watery field... What she saw was a cloth hat as opposed to a straw one, singularity enough in that world of cooing women each of whom was called Ma'am". (30) Sethe's mother nursed her for a couple of weeks and then she recalls "I sucked from another woman whose job it was." (60-61) Linden Peach remarks on this aspect of maternity experienced by the slave women:

The use of the verb "sucked" emphasizes how the White man system has reduced black women to breeding stock... Coupled with the noun "job", it also reinforces the denial of the closest of emotional bonds, that between mother and child, and how slavery exploits post-natal rejection by turning the separation of mother and child into a systematised form of breeding. (104)

The alliance of milk with maternity reminded the female slave of her fecundity. The nursing mothers' breasts compelled a slower pace of work in the fields. It is therefore not unlikely that the overseer's whiplash drew milk and blood out of the same

bosom almost simultaneously. Sethe was however the only child whose life was spared by her mother since she was fathered by a black man.

The act of infanticide performed by Sethe proves the excess of violence disguised in the mother. In an attempt to save her children from the slave master, she prefers to metamorphose herself into a killer – a pursuer of her little ones. Than accept their fates of repugnant slavery. Sethe, who was “named...for the black man who was her father... carries a man’s name through life, although perhaps we may read the “e” on Sethe as an attempt to feminise the name” (Beaulieu 70) Lynda Koolish makes an interesting observation on Sethe:

....Sethe, whose name alludes to Biblical Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve, the “appointed” or “granted” or “substituted” son who replaces the murdered Abel, the dispossessed, the murdered others who died during slavery, Middle Passage, and beyond. She is also the substituted self, the one who, in order for the child to survive, as a double or alter replaces the wounded child and takes on all of the child’s vulnerability, pains... the experience of sexual and physical abuse. (*Look Smart’s Find Articles*)

Continuing with my research into Sethe’s character I question whether she figures more prominently as the feminised form of Seth – the Egyptian god of evil. The archetypal opponent of Maat, the goddess of order, sincerity and justice, Seth pronounces fear. Yet I fail to accept Morrison’s Sethe within essentialist parameters of negativity and perversion. She is an amalgamation of Seth and Maat – designed to love and to destroy without hindrance. The African myth supports the brutality of Seth since he has been the generator of the equilibrium of forces and the source of tremendous power.

Sethe’s murder of Beloved based on the real incident of Margaret Garner brings readers and the free young Black community to contemplate, in the words of the novelist “ the complicated psychic power one had to exercise to resist

devastation" (New York Times Magazine). The Garner/ Sethe episode is the only section of the narrative that records the perspectives of the slave-catchers. It turns the victors (the slave owners i.e. Schoolteacher and his nephew) helpless victims of defeat. They are compelled to depart following the incident and are introduced to an hitherto unexpected fury by a woman solely identified by them as a slave. Sethe is punished for murder by the law and imprisoned for many years before she knows a free life at 124 Bluestone Road. Dominated by a strange desire to claim liberty for those whose lives were formed within her, Sethe remembers after a lapse of eighteen years the frenzied rage of desperation that compelled her to say: "No. no. nono. Nonono." (163) It is Morrison's poetic exuberance that frames Sethe's torment in the simplest vocabulary conveying invincible truths beyond rational human contemplations:

"She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. (163)

Referred as the "Phallic Mother" (196) by Katherine B. Payant, Sethe is a case study for psychoanalytic critics who contend that " [T]he fusion of good mother and pre-Oedipal discourse provides the logic that makes sense of such action" (Fitzgerald 118). Sethe tells Paul D – an ex-slave:

Grown don't mean nothing to a mother. A child is a child. They get bigger, older, but grown? What's that supposed to mean? In my heart it don't mean a thing. (45)

The ghost of Beloved returns walking "around the house naked or wrapped in a sheet, her belly protruding like a winning watermelon", (250) and Sethe remains unperturbed. In her inability to forgive herself for the guilt committed, the mother patiently waits for her child to claw her throat "until rubies of blood opened there" (250). Whether Sethe surrenders or whether Beloved revels in torture is a question left open to the readers'

imagination. *Beloved's* "belly big and tight" (261) pushes the present conditions into the past, enabling recollection of the very prototype of fertility, evoking the "figure of Mnemosyne and of the muse of the Black woman artist" (Grewal 116) and reminding Suggs' family of the mothers through her/his-story.

A cluster of surrealistic images complete the narrative as the final hour of departure for the ghost of *Beloved* draws to a close. The disenfranchised family living with the dead are apparent dwellers in a necropolis. Sethe's penultimate divorce from her child purges her of all trauma. The rites of passage become easier for Sethe. She is re-absorbed by the Ohio community of Blacks and ex-slaves. Concluding the tale, Morrison states that the story is "not a story to pass on" (275). The novel ends with the name of the inexplicable imagination exemplifying mother, child, guilt, shame, seduction, victory, loss, pain, pathos, love, sex, debt, freedom, death (and still many more that may nest in the mind): "*Beloved*".

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